MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE BOARD OF THE GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL HELD IN THE OLD SENATE ROOM, IN THE IRWIN STREET BUILDING, ON TUESDAY, 8 AUGUST 2006

PRESENT:

Dean of the Graduate Research School (Professor Robyn Owens) as Chair
Postgraduate Students’ Association President (Mr Benjamin Jardine)
Professor Craig A Atkins (Deputy Chair)
Professor Arun Dharmarajan
Associate Professor Judith Johnston
Professor Matthew Knuiman
Associate Professor Ian McArthur
Dr Allan McKinley
Associate Professor Brett Nener

Executive Officer (Mr Chester Cutinha)

BY INVITATION:

Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships (Dr Sato Juniper)
Graduate Education Officer (Dr Michael Azariadis)
Ms Sue King (Administrative Officer, Graduate Research and Scholarships)

APOLOGIES:

Nominee of the Chair of the Academic Board (Associate Professor Annette George)
Graduate Education Officer (Dr Krystyna Haq)
Professor Mike Anderson
Professor Ken Clements
Professor Kevin Croft
Professor Norman Etherington
Associate Professor Susan Prescott
Professor Jim Whelan
Director, Research Services (Dr Campbell Thomson)

WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Professor Matthew Knuiman who was returning to the Board as a Co-opted Member.

1. CALL FOR DECLARATIONS OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Members and guests were requested to declare any conflicts of interest that they may have with respect to any items on the agenda.

Professor Matthew Knuiman declared a conflict of interest with respect to the candidate referred to in item 7(a)(i) and left the room during the discussion of this item.

Dr Allan McKinley arrived after this item. He declared a conflict of interest with respect to the candidate referred to in item 8(b) prior to the discussion of the item. Dr McKinley did not speak to the item.

Professor Robyn Owens declared a conflict of interest with respect to the candidate referred to in item 8(e) and left the room during the discussion of this item.
2. **MINUTES – REF: F36**

**RESOLVED – 85**

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Board of the Graduate Research School held on Tuesday, 11 July 2006 be confirmed.

3. **CHANGES TO THE COMPOSITION OF THE BOARD OF THE GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL – REF: F34**

Members were reminded that at the time of stepping down from the Board in January 2006, Professor Matthew Knuiman had indicated to the Chair his willingness to be co-opted to the Board after his return from leave, should he be invited. Professor Knuiman had now accepted the invitation from the Chair to rejoin the Board of the Graduate Research School as a co-opted member from the August Board meeting. Professor Knuiman’s term will expire on 31 March 2007.

**Noted.**

4. **REVIEWING RESEARCH PROPOSALS**

Members were reminded that one of the important tasks for Members of the Board of the Graduate Research School is the review of Research Proposals. Members were advised that while many schools have rigorous internal review processes, the final review by the Board of the Graduate Research School is a vital part of the cycle of accountability, and approval by the Board is neither automatic nor trivial. Candidates whose Proposals are not approved in the first instance are provided with feedback to assist them to revise the Proposal to an acceptable standard.

Despite the importance of the review of Research Proposals, the Graduate Research School appears never to have produced a set of guidelines for members to follow in this process. Members were invited to discuss their strategies for reviewing Research Proposals effectively with the main points arising out of the discussion to be used as the basis of a set of guidelines for members, and in particular, to assist in the induction of future new members of the Board.

Members were advised that while reviewing proposals they were expected to review, and to comment if appropriate, on any or all aspects of the Proposal. Aspects of particular interest included:

- ethics and safety issues and whether the appropriate approvals have been obtained from the relevant UWA body;
- the budget and funding issues;
- conflicts of interest, for example in the proposed arrangements for supervision;
- suitability of expertise of the proposed supervisors;
- appropriate use of references and absence of plagiarism;
- overall acceptability as a piece of academic writing; and
- appropriateness of the project for the degree in which it is intended to be undertaken (eg in scope, structure and originality)

NB: the Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships noted that tasks for Confirmation of Candidature had been inadvertently left off the list, but this was obviously an important item to be included.

In the discussion that followed, the following main points were raised:

- This is a great idea whereby new members can benefit from the collective wisdom of existing and past Board members’ experience
- Guidelines for the approval of upgrades from Masters by Research to a PhD should be included
- Candidates continue to use outdated forms. This problem should soon cease to exist as the Graduate Research School is now referring candidates to the website to download the most current version of the form as opposed to providing them hard copies of the same which can become outdated over a period of time
- Candidates sometimes selectively omit sections of a form, and care should be taken to ensure that all sections are there
- The Graduate Research School is in the process of locking all its Word forms to prevent selective deletion of sections or questions. In time, many of the forms will be fully online, and will only be accepted online
- Care should be taken to ensure the protection of the candidate’s IP. All parties involved must be made aware that candidates are expected by examiners to be listed as first author on publications arising out of their theses
- All parties involved should be aware of the risks associated with the project, particularly that the project might not be completed on time. For example, whether the proposed time frame is feasible; or whether part of the funding for the project is dependent on future research grant applications; or whether seasonality could cause problems
- There are also risks associated with recruiting patients. Potential risks associated with this could be quantified based on past evidence
- Should a section for risk assessment be built into the form?
- A separate section might be overkill, but members checking research proposals should determine whether the candidate has any contingency planning against possible risks
- The Board should, however, avoid becoming so risk-averse as to stifle creativity
- Part of the task of designing a research proposal is to be aware of and plan for potential risks
- A member queried whether it is appropriate for the Board to make determinations on supervision. Disallowing a supervisor should be the role of the Head of School who will be more aware of the expertise or lack thereof of a supervisor
- It is important to ensure that supervisors with appropriate expertise and experience to supervise the project have been identified – it is reasonable to expect the Board to oversee this
- Board Members should rely on Heads of School to determine whether the supervisory arrangements are adequate
- The research proposal should be checked to ensure that the research design and methodology are appropriate. These can become areas of major concern during latter stages of the candidature and during the examination of the thesis
- A checklist could be designed for Board members to go through while evaluating research proposals and this should also be provided to the schools so that candidates and supervisors are aware of what is required
- Research proposals should indicate whether the candidate has the adequate skills, for example laboratory skills, to undertake the research, and if not should clearly outline what steps are being undertaken for the candidate to acquire the required skills
- Confirmation of candidature should contain milestones with reasonable and measurable outcomes
- Ethics approvals need to be from the relevant UWA Committees rather than external committees, and the Graduate Research School’s forms may need to be amended to reflect this.
- The Research Proposal should identify safety and health risks and explain how these are to be managed.
- It is difficult to be aware of conflicts of interest if you do not know the supervisor and/or candidate personally
- The checklist to schools could indicate that one of the aspects of the evaluation of research proposals is checking for plagiarism.
- A member queried whether it is possible for Board members to identify plagiarism, and it was suggested that a way of doing this is to be alert to the presence of multiple writing styles in the document.
- Board members should check that the scale and scope of the project are neither too small nor too large for the degree in question
- Candidates, supervisors and schools must be educated that the approval of research proposals is not a mere rubber stamping process and that inadequate proposals will be rejected
- What criteria must be used to determine whether a research proposal is knocked back or whether it is approved subject to changes of the provision of additional information? A member suggested that if the reviewing member’s criticisms or concerns are about the document as a whole then the Proposal should be rejected so that it must be de-drafted and re-submitted in entirety. However, if the criticisms or concerns are related to only a section, the Proposal can be accepted subject to the amendments being made. Ms King, who administers the Research Proposals, noted that when a Proposal is accepted subject to particular amendments she forwards the amended section to the Board member for confirmation that the amendment is adequate.

5. PROPOSAL FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF COMPLETION SEMINARS FOR PhD CANDIDATES

Members were provided for their consideration a proposal for the implementation of Completion Seminars
for PhD candidates. Members were advised that while many schools have procedures in place to ensure that completing candidates have the opportunity, and in some cases the obligation, to present their work in a public forum prior to submission for examination, not all schools require this.

The proposal for the universal implementation of Completion Seminars, with appropriate mechanisms for constructive feedback, would provide candidates with the opportunity to refine their theses before they were submitted for examination. It was hoped that this would further improve the general quality of theses being sent out to examination from the University, thereby reducing the number of adverse reports from examiners.

In the discussion that followed, the following main points were raised:
- Candidates may be anxious about the seminar
- There could be possible delays in the submission of theses with anxious candidates focused more on the seminar than on the submission
- Some queries from uninformed members of a public audience might lead to a candidate losing confidence in their work
- Feedback from panels should assist candidates to complete and submit their theses.
- Seminars already exist in many schools and making them mandatory with panels' reports to the Board might be over-regulation
- The Board would only require sign off from the school that the seminar had been held and would not require the panel's report. These could be held at the school level and called upon, if available, in the event of an examiner's adverse report
- A candidate would at most be able to present only a portion of their thesis in a forty five minute seminar, which would be unlikely to lead to sufficient feedback to improve the written document
- The seminar would be useful for many candidates but not necessarily in this form.
- The proposal is a significant departure from current procedure
- There may be significant additional workload pressures on Graduate Research Coordinators to arrange for, coordinate and attend such seminars
- There are already many schools that require such seminars, and for the purposes of consistency across the University, the Board should at the very least provide a list of guidelines for these
- With a general audience, candidates might spend the time explaining what they had done rather than getting useful feedback from knowledgeable people in the field
- The seminars would be more useful if they had a targeted audience rather than a general audience
- At what point during the writing up of the draft thesis should the seminar be undertaken?
- The seminar could be one more stressful thing to do at an already stressful part of the candidature
- Candidates at the time of writing up have completed the research and may be working part time, sometimes overseas, making it inconvenient to return for their seminar
- What amount of time would a candidate need to prepare for such a seminar and would this lead to an increase in the number of requests for extensions?
- Would candidates avoid presenting the "hard" questions at the seminar in order to avoid uncomfortable scrutiny?
- Would one of the objectives of the seminar be to determine whether the thesis is the candidate's own work? The seminar could determine if candidates in fact possessed one of the generic skills we claim that they have, and would also serve in uncoupling the work of the candidate from that of the supervisor
- A member commented that there is a difference between a presentation of work and a thesis defence. This falls somewhere in between. This particular member was in favour of the thesis defence model, but it had not been accepted in the University.
- More thought needs to be given to this proposal before it can be approved
- A Member mentioned that concerns of bullying at such seminars had already been raised within some sections of the University and that general information on the University's relevant policies would be passed on to Dr Sato Juniper, Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships, for circulation to candidates undertaking their research higher degrees at the University.

At the conclusion of this robust discussion, the Chair, Professor Robyn Owens, placed before members three options, viz., the approval of the proposal, the approval of the proposal with amendments or the rejection of the proposal. The Board

**RESOLVED – 86**

To reject the proposal for the introduction of completion seminars for PhD candidates at this time.